

Town of South Toms River  
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail  
Intersection of Garden State Parkway and  
County Road 530  
South Toms River  
Ocean County  
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1017

HABS  
NJ  
15-TRES  
2-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

## TOWN OF SOUTH TOMS RIVER

HABS  
NJ  
15-TRES,  
2-

HABS No. NJ-1017

Location: Including Beachwood, Ocean Gate, and Pine Beach, New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Intersection of Garden State Parkway and County Road 530, Ocean County, New Jersey.

Significance: Though the area south of Toms River was open for development in 1881 when the Philadelphia and Long Branch met the New York and Long Branch Railroad, extensive urban development began with twentieth-century land speculation. In the early twentieth century, South Toms River was the site of birdville, a bird-house factory, which drew visitors from around the world. The area is also significant as home to the Admiral Farragut Academy, the first American naval preparatory school. Today, South Toms River is basically a suburb of Toms River to the north. The surrounding towns of Ocean Gate, Pine Beach and Beachwood are often perceived as part of the single region of South Toms River, all dependant on the municipal and commercial services of the nearby county seat.

History: According to the Ocean County Observer, "for most people, South Toms River begins where Main Street in Toms River, also known as Route 166, crosses the Toms River and heads toward Route 530." Today the borough remains primarily a residential extension of Toms River. The surrounding towns of Ocean Gate, Pine Beach and Beachwood are often perceived as part of the single region of South Toms River, all dependant on the municipal and commercial services of the nearby county seat. A central traffic artery, Route 9 connects the communities with the southern shore, while the river forms a common northern boundary.

Though the three-quarter of a square mile borough is currently identified as an interchange, the town was once the site of Birdville, a place people traveled hundreds of miles to visit. In 1914 Albert P. Greim moved to South Toms River and established a bird-house factory on Flint Road. Greim studied birds within the privacy of his home, a wood-frame room on stilts hidden among the branches of an oak tree adjacent the factory. His observations resulted in special "rustic" birdhouses, dispelling the myth that each home must be suited to a particular type of bird. Thousands of the houses were sold every year by the Wanamaker stores of New York and Philadelphia as well as to the emperor of Japan, who purchased a large number.<sup>1</sup>

Near his factory and home, Greim built a concrete Moorish-style chapel known as Oratory Bethlehem. "Of very original design, built solidly of concrete, with arched roof and dome and many artistic niches and original decorations of tile," the structure was an early example of concrete construction.<sup>2</sup> Greim probably modeled the

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<sup>1</sup> "Ocean county group visit many points of interest during tour," Ocean County Sun (May 19, 1933).

<sup>2</sup> William Butler, ed., Beachwood Borough Directory and Whos Who, 1924 (New York: The Blanchard Press, 1924), 139.

building after Fonthill, the Pennsylvania home of his friend, Dr. Henry Chapmen Mercer. A famous archaeologist and artist, Mercer designed mosaic floor tiles in the Pennsylvania State Capital Building that won the grand prize at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition. Some of the ceramic tiles embedded in Greim's chapel walls and ceiling may have been designed by Mercer.<sup>3</sup> While significant as the site of South Toms River's first council meetings when the area became a borough in 1927, Birdville could not survive the effects of the depression.

#### Pine Beach

Two years after the Philadelphia and Long Branch and the New York and Long Branch railroads connected, a spur was laid from the Pennsylvania line to Island Heights, on the bay. In 1908 Robert Horter, vacationing from Philadelphia, realized the potential value of the land at the railroad crossing, Island Heights Junction. Within a year, Horter and his financial backer, George Kelly, had the land surveyed, streets mapped out, and a trainload of prospective customers brought in. The Pine Beach Improvement Company sold 109 properties the first year. Building continued at a frantic pace up to 1912, when demand began to level out. By then, Kelly had already completed the Pine Beach Inn, a seventy-five room hotel that became part of the Admiral Farragut Academy in 1933. During the boom years, LeRoy Hutchinson built the Pine Beach Chapel, a Queen-Anne Shingle style church. Five years later, Hutchinson completed the Pine Beach Yacht Club, a building he replaced with an expanded two-story version in 1921.<sup>4</sup> The local architect was also responsible for much of the residential development concentrated along Midland and Henley streets within the founder's grid-plan. When it was incorporated in 1925, Pine Beach consisted of "about 120 houses (80 percent summer occupied), two stores, Winterling's gas station (now Lamp Post Inn), Pine Beach Inn, Pine Beach Chapel, Pine Beach Yacht Club."<sup>5</sup>

The establishment of the Admiral Farragut Academy, the first American naval preparatory school, brought unexpected notoriety to Pine Beach. After searching the coast from Florida to Maine, school founders decided to remodel the empty Pine Beach Inn into a dormitory and classrooms. Covering only three acres when it was founded in 1933, the campus had spread over twenty-eight acres and included eight buildings by 1975. The academy is incorporated into a residential neighborhood oriented toward the river. Within walking distance of both chapel and docks, the school marks a decisive break in the regular pattern of houses and pines.

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Brandon, "Finds Historic Tiles in Birdville" New Jersey Courier (Toms River, March 20, 1969), 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Heatley, Pine Beach Yesterdays (Borough of Pine Beach, Ocean County, 1975), 5-9.

<sup>5</sup> Heatley, 33.

### Beachwood

In 1915, the New York Tribune promotion department published a pamphlet describing Beachwood, the latest resort development south of Toms River. Interested buyers were invited to send for an application to purchase a Beachwood lot. For a mere \$19.60 and the price of a six months Tribune subscription, future residents could enjoy "the best there is at Barnegat Bay."<sup>6</sup> A money-making scheme created by Bertram Chapman Mayo, the Tribune's promotions manager, Beachwood began as 2,000 acres laid out in 20' x 100' lots. Hoping to attract New Yorkers, the advertisement emphasized the future town's location at the intersection of the Central and Pennsylvania railroads. Pictures of forest paths, blueberry bushes and bathing in the bay were juxtaposed with the assurance that "a continuous stream of automobiles pass through Beachwood on the way to Atlantic City."<sup>7</sup>

The Tribune immediately hired civil engineer Addison D. Nickerson to design and build a clubhouse, pier, bath house, lodge, dining hall, and railroad station. "By May 1915, More than ninety new owners and their families were visiting Beachwood, living in tents on their new land or staying at the thirty-seven room lodge."<sup>8</sup> Tribune advertisements failed to mention that blacks and Asians were not among the thousands encouraged to settle in the newly planned community. The exclusive settlement of "rustic cahins and bungalows" became a borough in 1917.

Five years later, Beachwood was in the process of forming a volunteer fire department, building a chapel, and constructing the Polyhue Yacht Club. J. H. Perrine of Barnegat designed the cat rigs used in club races, each with a different colorsail. Today, the Beachwood Yacht Club occupies the older building still overlooking Toms River. Primarily a residential community, Beachwood has maintained a suburban scale despite the proximity of Route 9. The tradition of preserving the pines, established by the Beachwood Property Owners Association in 1919, has also preserved a sense of the atmosphere Mayo so convincingly described.<sup>9</sup>

### Ocean Gate

Like Pine Beach and Beachwood, Ocean Gate, the most coastal of the three resorts, began as a planned development. Founded in 1909 by Charles Guttentag, president of the Great Eastern Building Corporation, Ocean Gate was promoted in Philadelphia newspapers before building began. Potential buyers, who were taken to the future

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<sup>6</sup> Bertram Chapman Mayo, "The Greatest Subscription Premium Ever Offered and the Reason Why" (New York: New York Tribune Promotion Dept., 1915), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Mayo, 7.

<sup>8</sup> "Beachwood born of give-away lots," Asbury Park Press (Sunday, July 1, 1990), AA2.

<sup>9</sup> "Paper's Stunt Built Beachwood," Asbury Park Press, (Sept. 17, 1962).

settlement by train from Philadelphia, often bought lots on the trip home.<sup>10</sup> The property, once a farm owned by a Toms River businessman, was laid out in a grid of streets named for popular resorts like Long Branch and Cape May. Residential lots varied in price according to their relation to the Pennsylvania Railroad line that cut diagonally through town; houses south of the tracks started at \$500, while those north of the railroad were valued at a minimum of \$1000. Potential customers passed through the 1910 train station on Narragansette Avenue, now used as a municipal building.

By the time it became a borough in 1918, Ocean Gate had an elementary school, a fire company, two hotels, and several stores. After its incorporation, the city improved roads, and constructed a public pier and an 8'-wide boardwalk. A Methodist church was built on the corner of Bayview and Asbury Avenues. Unlike the primarily residential neighboring communities, Ocean Gate developed a substantial commercial district. Though Ocean Gate Avenue is hardly bustling today, the remaining shops, Kiesel's hotel and the yacht club suggest a self-sufficient community with a once-prosperous past.

Prepared by: Sarah Allaback  
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- Sources: "Beachwood Born of Give-away Lots." Asbury Park Press, 1 July 1990, AA2.
- Brandon, Donald. "Finds Historic Tiles in Birdville." New Jersey Courier, 20 March 1969, 2-3.
- Butler, William, ed. Beachwood Borough Directory and Whos Who, 1924 New York: The Blanchard Press, 1924.
- Heatley, Stanley. Pine Beach Yesterdays. Ocean County: Borough of Pine Beach, 1975.
- Mayo, Bertram Chapman. "The Greatest Subscription Premium Ever Offered and the Reason Why." New York: New York Tribune Promotion Dept., 1915.
- Mease, Floyd. "Memories of Bygone Days, Ocean Gate, New Jersey." By the Author, 1985.
- "Ocean County Group Visit Many Points of Interest During Tour." Ocean County Sun, 19 May 1933, n.p.
- "Paper's Stunt Built Beachwood." Asbury Park Press, 17 September 1962, n.p.

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<sup>10</sup> Floyd Mease, "Memories of Bygone Days, Ocean Gate, New Jersey," (Floyd Mease, 1985), 5.

Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatz (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.